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The Aesthetics of Falsehood: Reading Marlowe's Protagonist in *The Jew of Malta* in the Light of Kierkegaard's Philosophy

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In the final scene of Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta*, the protagonist Barabas is seen to be busy over the successful implementation of a plot. Just before that, he, in alliance with the Turkish prince Calymath, dethroned Ferneze, his arch-rival in the play, from his position of the Governor of Malta and became himself the new Governor of the Island. But such a situation where he has outwitted his enemy and can enjoy now the secure political position bolstered by the friendship of the Turkish prince is hardly what he wants. Rather being enamoured of the lure of plot-making, he decides to go for another plot in which Calymath is invited by him to a dinner where the former will be burnt alive by a boiling cauldron placed beneath the stage. Calymath, his present ally, therefore, is his dupe in this plot and Ferneze, his life-long enemy will be present in the scene to appreciate his skill and guarantee his artistic aptitude in plot-making. Even though, in this plot, wealth will play a role as Barabas intends to return the Governorship of Malta to the deposed Ferneze at the cost of a pearl, but the meaning that the plot intends to convey to Barabas is an artistic relish at the successful orchestration of a plot that will prove his power and freedom to unsettle any kind of relationship or define relationship at his will.

For this reason, the stage is orchestrated properly and Barabas himself supervises all the arrangements with intense eagerness. Finding everything going as he wants, Barabas, bursts with self-gloating,

Why, is not this a kingly kind of trade, to purchase towns

By treachery, and sell them by deceit?

Now tell me worldlings, underneath the sun

If greater falsehood ever has been done. (V.v.41-50)

Even though such a move of Barabas's ultimately proves fatal for him because Ferneze betrays him and instead of Calymath, he is actually thrown into the boiling cauldron, the point about his action that gets illustrated here is his fascination for falsehood. He pursues and practises this falsehood almost with the earnestness of an artist. Falsehood is the only meaning of his existence and the only object of his pleasure. His whole career on the stage is a skillful orchestration of this aesthetics of falsehood. In his aesthetic pursuit of falsehood, he is supposed to have anticipated a pattern of existence that looks similar to what Kierkegaard expounds as the existential form in the aesthetic stage of human life.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish existentialist, pursued, like most existentialists, the philosophical question of a man's 'becoming'. To an existentialist, the very question of existence is tied with the point of becoming an individual because as existence precedes essence¹, that is, as it is existence or the mode of it that determines the essence of the individual, so existence is synonymous with 'becoming'. Obviously not static and complete because becoming is a journey that affects one's existence and because becoming as a process has a logical end only in the physical extinction of the individual, such a journey generates loneliness, risks and tragedy. Kierkegaard, in this critical context, has a unique position. Being a Christian, Kierkegaard has always kept the attainment of religious faith as the final and most coveted attainment in the process of becoming. To the existentialists who are neither Christians nor having any belief in the teleological end of religious faith, such a philosophical system has generated both agreement and controversy among the philosophers of his time as well as after him.

To Kierkegaard, the journey of an individual in the path of becoming to be culminated only in the attainment of religious faith has three stages—the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious—each path leading to the next only when a certain deliberate action, a leap, be it of the ethical or of religious faith, is initiated. Every individual may not reach the religious or the ethical because of the want of 'leap'. That is why some individual even remains throughout his life in the aesthetic stage as he or she never neither chooses nor is willing to choose that 'leap'. The question of choice and deliberation therefore is extremely necessary in these leaps.

The aesthetic phase seems to be where the individual starts the journey. This phase is marked by a comprehensive engagement with activities that refer neither to any ethical standard such as good and evil, nor to any religious principles such as sin and grace. Standing beyond good and evil with clear violation of moral norms and immersed in the activities that only generate pleasure, mostly sensuous, the individual in the aesthetic stage is concerned about the present or the instantiated moment with no looking before and after. The individual at this phase has neither any repentance for any action of the past nor any expectation of anything hopeful in future because such questions of repentance and expectation will only make possible the existence of the past and future which an aesthete in the Kierkegaardian world never has nor desires. Present and only present seems to be the abiding concern and to transform this present into the terms of time and space by the yardstick of pleasure is the only desirable endeavour of the individual in the phase.

Kierkegaard happens to have introduced certain mythical and fictitious figures as the models of individuals in different stages. His texts *Either/Or* and *Stages in Life's Way* have ample demonstration of the three stages where he introduces figures like Don Juan, Socrates and Abraham as the models of the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious respectively. In fact, he tells several tales through pseudonymous authors with a view to maintaining a distance from us whereby "we can see and test the respective morals of these stories on our own lives" (26). However Kierkegaard's presentation of the aesthetic stage constructs a subject that stands beyond good and evil, that considers pleasure as the main principle of existence and that creates existence out the continuous pursuit of pleasure. The protagonist of Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta* can be an interesting exemplum to Kierkegaard's aesthete-individual and the present essay likes to study the theoretical parallelisms standing between these two.

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The Jew of Malta begins with a Prologue where Machevil, undoubtedly the corrupt form of Machiavelli, states his relationship with the Jew-hero,

I come not, I
To read a lecture here in Britany,
But to present the tragedy of a Jew,
Who smiles to see how full his bags are crammed,
Which money was not got without my means. (Pro. 28-32)

The Jew-hero, too, in his first appearance in the play, subscribes to this view by referring to the kind of passion for wealth that has gripped his mind. In his version, therefore, “Infinite riches in a little room” (I.i.37) is what he craves for. But it is not the Jew-hero alone who seems to have been captivated by this lust. Indeed, Barabas’s ‘infinite riches’ is extorted, partially of course, by Ferneze on racial and religious grounds. Ferneze, too, is harassed by the Turkish force that demands him to pay the “ten years’ tribute that remains unpaid” (I.ii.7). Later on, the friars try to squeeze money from Barabas. He is cheated also by his slave, Ithamore and his fiancée-prostitute. Therefore when a character in the play is asked by Ferneze, “What wind drives you thus into Malta road?” and he answers, “The wind that bloweth all the world besides, / Desire of gold” (III.iv.3-4), he seems to have summed up the quintessence of the desire that moulds the characters of the play.

A world that runs on a rampant greed for wealth has hardly any moral, ethical or religious standard to uplift. From top to bottom and both inside and outside of this world, the mercantile desire ruins all possibilities of any moral or religious value to grow up. The only exception to this general phenomenon in the play is Abigail, Barabas’s daughter, who, however, after a lot of tribulation in her life, comes to this rather pessimistic conclusion, “But I perceive there is no love on earth, / Pity in Jews, nor piety in Turks” (III. iii. 50-51). Against this background, the play’s episodic exhibition of the Jew-hero’s exploits takes a rather significant meaning so far as the existential question is concerned.

Barabas in this drama may be and has been identified with a passion for riches, but in the course of the play, such passion seems to have shifted from wealth to other concerns. Born out of different myths, he simply performs the scripted roles as guided by such myths, albeit without the profound and serious meanings inherent in the mythical scripts. For example, to Abigail, as he himself stresses, he is the father as Agamemnon is to Iphigen². Like Agamemnon, he will sacrifice his daughter, or rather like Abraham in the *Bible*; he will kill his own progeny. But whereas Agamemnon’s treatment is marked by a deep ethical value and Abraham’s, according to Kierkegaard, by a religious faith, Barabas has no such values to live by and uplift in his treatment of his daughter. The concern that seems to have guided him in his desire to sacrifice his daughter is a crude personal grudge, a remorseless passion for revenge. The whole play is an account of how Barabas, starting his life on the stage as a mercantile tycoon and resorting to falsehood to save his wealth is gradually turned into a monster who uses this falsehood again and again to outwit his opponents till this falsehood becomes the sole objective and driving force of

his existence giving his life the meaning and pleasure till he is identified with it completely as we have seen in the extract quoted at the beginning of this essay. It is no longer for the passion for wealth that he uses falsehood; falsehood ultimately becomes his passion.

So as an individual in the aesthetic stage does as per the existential formulae of Kierkegaard, Barabas concentrates on the constant playing out of a passion, neither choosing nor at all thinking to choose any of the ethical or religious goals that could have uplifted him to the succeeding stages of the process in the becoming of an individual. Although he has boastfully spoken that he is “born to better chance/ And framed of finer mould than common men” (I.ii.220-221), this finer mould in him never catapults him to a higher moral or religious plane. Nor has he ever chosen to use this finer mould except in the almost aesthetic persuasion of falsehood. Moreover he asserts that he is a man,

That measure naught but by the present time.
A reaching thought will search his deepest wits,
And cast with cunning for the time to come,
For evils are apt to happen every day”. (I.ii. 222-225)

This places him in apposition with a Kierkegaardian aesthete since he marks his future and marks it with the markers of cunning. The very temporality of his activities such as falsehood or cunning is not limited to his present. The past as well as the future are engulfed by it. In a sense he anticipates the Kierkegaardian aesthete in making the passion for falsehood as the marker of his present, past and future and thereby falsehood seems to be the quintessence not just of his existence but also of the very duration as well as space he dwells upon.

But how does he perform this falsehood? Here once again we see the reference to Kierkegaard becoming very relevant. As an aesthete in the Kierkegaardian philosophy plays his roles through masks and ultimately reaching no essence, Barabas is a role player who assumes different masks to mark the stage with his passion. His long speech with Ithamore which gives an account of the different garbs he has worn from time to time with a view to existing in his life shows tremendous professional variety. But such arrays of roles are actually many faces of the same role—one role manifesting itself just with different facets. The principle of falsehood makes all these roles look similar and one. But the one role he plays is the role that is shaped ironically by falsehood and this very principle of falsehood, self-beguiling as it is, ultimately proves to be an unreliable marker for a sustained and sustainable physical presence. In such a situation, Barabas is just a fiction of many roles, a bundle of identities and an effect of masquerade that never allows him to settle anywhere and leaves him just floating on a void³. Speaking about almost the same state of existence, Kierkegaard comments, albeit in the lip of one of his aesthete-characters,

Do you know that there comes a midnight hour when everyone has to throw off his mask?...I have seen men in real life who so long deceived others that at last their true nature could not reveal itself...Or can you think of anything more frightful than that it might end with your nature being resolved into a multiplicity, that you really might become many, become, like those unhappy demoniacs, a legion and you thus would have lost the inmost and holiest thing of all in a man,

the unifying power of personality?...[Such a one] may be so inexplicably woven into relationships of life which extend far beyond himself, that he almost cannot reveal himself. But he who cannot reveal himself cannot love, and he who cannot love is the most unhappy man of all. (qtd. Flynn. 32)

In fact, this self-beguiling masquerade dries up the heart. Desperate to mark time and space that seems to be alien and indifferent, Barabas seems to resort to a life-style that leaves his heart completely perched-up. His words with Itamore seem to capture this.

I will teach thee that shall stick by thee:

First be thou void of these affections,

Compassion, love, vain hope, and heartless fear;

Be moved at nothing. (II, iii, 169-172)

Abigail, his daughter, too has spoken just this. But such a state of mind is not what Abigail desires or endorses. She is rather thrown into it. For Barabas, this is a deliberate choice. He has willingly and willfully chosen a dried heart for himself. His exhortation promotes the pattern of a remorseless, loveless pursuit gravitating towards single focus-- revenge against the Christians. No wonder then that he has killed his own daughter vindicating the existence as being pursuit of the need of the present in which there is neither remorse nor any fear of sin.

Barabas continues to play this game of falsehood till the end of his life. In the final moment of his life on the stage, he reiterates this again or in some sense, sums up his life's philosophy with equally emphatic mode that establishes him as a pure aesthete of falsehood.

Then, Barabas, breathe forth thy latest fate,

And in the fury of thy torments strive

To end thy life with resolution.

Know, Governor, 'twas I that slew thy son;

I framed the challenge that did make them meet.

Know Calymath, I aimed thy overthrow,

And had I but escaped this stratagem

I would have brought confusion on you all,

Dammed Christian dogs, and Turkish infidels!

But now begins the extremity of heat

To pinch me with intolerable pangs:

Die, life: fly, soul; tongue, curse thy fill and die! (V.v.77-88)

The Jew-protagonist here catalogues the sins he has committed. But providing the catalogue in no way suggests that he considers them as sin and that he is admitting these activities with any repentance. The kind of sigh lurking behind his frank dissatisfaction of not being successful in his latest project of bringing confusion on all and thereby raising the art of falsehood to its limit is a clear indication that he is not happy for not doing what he promises to the audience. It at once indicates his failure of choice. Even though, Barabas's failure is attributed by Ferneze to a divine machination⁴, we know fairly well that such an attribution is merely rhetorical. Barabas who has committed himself to an art of falsehood, lives by it without choosing any redemption--religious or moral--by which he can lift himself to the phases of ethical and religious as propounded by Kierkegaard. In this sense, there is no point attributing any moral or religious standard to his being alive and pursuing his aesthetic project. His failure is just an existential phenomenon where he is free to choose the path of falsehood. If his death were at all important, it should be judged not by any discourse of divine retribution or moral consequence, but only as a secular inevitability of human mortality that happens to every mortal being. The point that remains worth-pondering is how he fares in his existential journey. From that perspective, he has satisfied the causes and endeavours that make a subject a worthy denizen of the aesthetic phase in Kierkegaard's philosophy.

Notes:

1. The idea of existence preceding essence is actually a Sartrean concept, developed later than Kierkegaard's but proved to be one of the foundational principles in the concept of Existentialism and therefore universally used by the existentialists. For a detailed discussion of the history of this point, see Westphal, especially Introduction.
2. Barabas says to a fellow Jew, "I have no charge, nor many children,/ But one sole daughter, whom I hold as dear / As Agamemnon did his Iphigen" (I.i.138-40).
3. Referring to this void in the existence of Barabas or Marlowe's heroes in general, Greenblatt comments, "In the neutrality of time and space that characterizes Marlowe's world, this 'constructive power' must exist within the hero himself; if it should fail for an instant he would fall into nothingness, become, in Barabas's words, 'a senseless lump of clay / That will with every water wash to dirt'" (75).
4. At the end of the play, Ferneze says, "let due praise be given / Neither to fate nor fortune, but to heaven" (V.v.122-123).

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